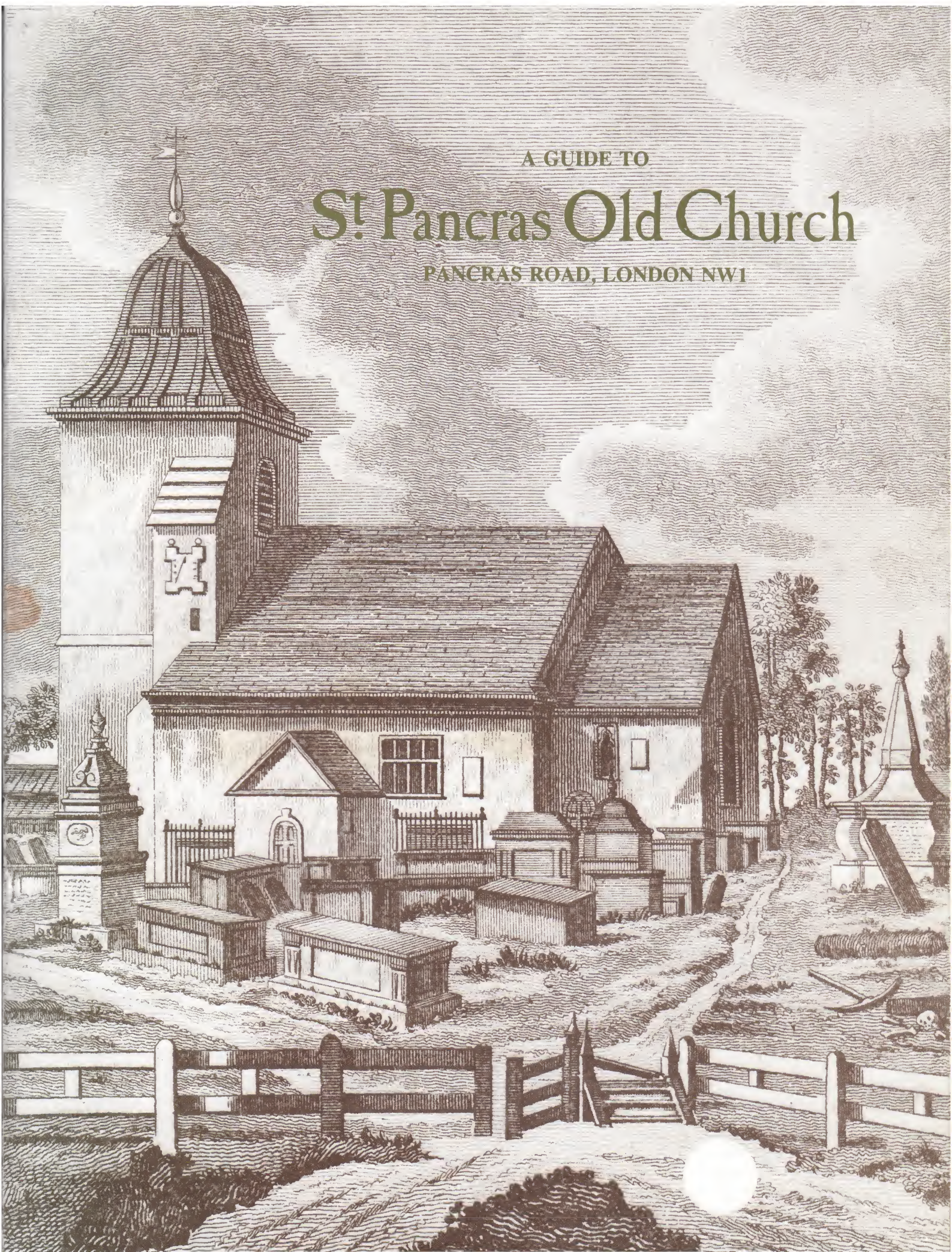


A GUIDE TO

St Pancras Old Church

PANCRAS ROAD, LONDON NW1





The Site

The Shrine on a hill

In days gone by, the little hillock on which the church now stands rose gently above the flood valley of the River Fleet, or Holbourne. It overlooked the site of a Roman encampment on the Brill (possibly Bury Hill), which sloped down towards Kings Cross and Euston.

Traces of the camp were visible in the lifetime of the antiquarian, Dr William E. Stukely (1687-1765), and a stone bearing the name of the XXth Legion was found in 1842 near Battlebridge (Kings Cross).

According to Sir Montagu Sharp (*Middlesex in British, Roman and Saxon Times*) the hill was the site of a pagan compitum or rural shrine, converted to Christian use even before the arrival of St Augustine's mission.

The first church

When a church was first built on the site cannot be established with any accuracy. Charles E. Lee's *St Pancras Church and Parish* states: "... Widespread and widely accepted tradition is in favour of the great antiquity of a church on this site, possibly as early as 313 or 314." A poem published anonymously in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1749, vol xix, 276, repeats the tradition:

To Rev'rend spire
of ancient Pancras view,
To ancient Pancras
pay the Rev'rence due.
Christ's sacred Altar
there first Britain saw
And gaz'd and worshipp'd
with an holy awe.
Whilst pitying Heav'n
diffus'd a saving ray
And heathen darkness
chang'd to Christian day.

The Vatican connection

The Reverend Weldon Champneys, vicar 1797-1810, claimed to have seen in Rome documents relating to the foundation of a church here in the fourth century.

Again, Maximilian Misson is quoted in Duppa's *Travels on the Continent* as saying of St John Lateran, the cathedral of Rome, "... this is the head and mother of all Christian churches, if you except that of St Pancras under Highgate, near London."

St John Lateran was founded by the Emperor Constantine in the year 324 as the Basilica of St Salvatore, and still takes precedence over the Roman churches.

However, freedom of religion had been restored to the Roman world in 313, and London was represented by Restitutus, its Bishop, at the Council of Arles in 314; so the persistent tradition, here at St Pancras, of an earlier building for Christian worship has a possible foundation.

In the demesne of St Paul's

In 604 King Ethelbert assigned the

land to St Paul's Cathedral, and a record of the prebendal manor is later confirmed by entries in the Domesday Book: "At S. Pancras the Canons of S. Paul's hold four hides," and "At S. Pancras, Walter, a Canon of S. Paul's, holds one hide. There is a plough there, and twenty four men who render thirty shillings yearly. The land lay and lies in the demesne of S. Paul's."

From the ninth century the area of the old parish is a narrow strip running from Ken Wood at Hampstead to a boundary with the parish of St Giles in the Fields, still to be seen marked on the shopfront of Heal's in Tottenham Court Road.

The patronage of the living is in the hands of the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's to this day.

Christian world, as well as to a borough, a hospital and a main line railway station, was beheaded by order of the Emperor Diocletian in the year 304, at about the age of fourteen.

He is said to have been the son of Cleonius and Cyriada, of Synnada in Phrygia. His parents died before he was twelve years old, and he was then cared for by his uncle Dionysus, who had a house on the Coelian Hill in Rome; with whom he was converted to Christianity by the Bishop Marcellinus.

Soon the persecutions began, and many Christians were put terribly to death. The Emperor is said to have wished to spare Pancras on account of his youth; but such was the strength of the boy's faith that he refused clemency, saying: "I dare not worship idols. God will give me strength to die for him as others have done."

The Saint

A youthful martyr

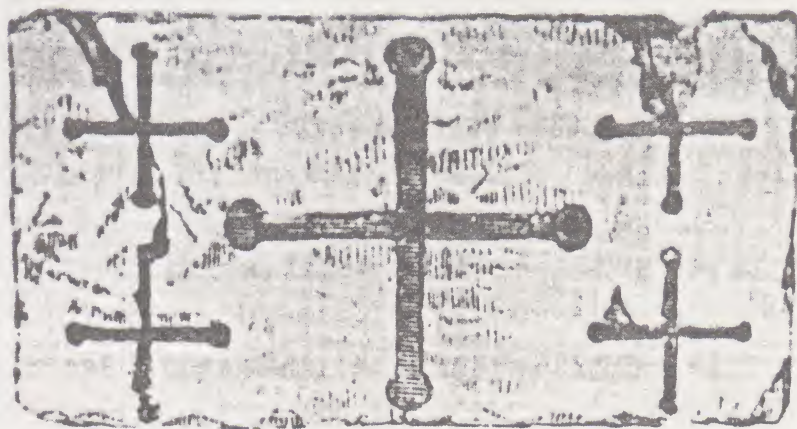
The Saint who has given his name to a score of churches throughout the

The birth of a legend

The site of his martyrdom is preserved under the Basilica of St Pancratius in Rome, near to which lived the Apostle of England, St Augustine. Hence his devotion to the boy-saint and desire to spread his cult. Donald Attwater, in his *Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, states that there are the bones of a martyr named Pancras beneath the basilica but that all else is legend.

However, it is a legend we treasure: the lone figure, valiant for truth, holding the palm of martyrdom and trampling on the devil, as depicted on a famous brass at Cowfold in Sussex, and in the seal of the old borough of St Pancras copied from

The VI century altar stone



it. The same figure can be seen over the main gate of the gardens in Pancras Road, and on some of the old street lamps.

It was also as the patron of truth and avenger of false oaths that the Saint was invoked by Tennyson when he made Duke William of Normandy say to King Harold:

“Lay thou thy hand
upon this golden pall;
Behold the jewel of Saint Pancratius
Woven into the gold.
Swear thou on this.”

The company of Saints

It is recorded that, in 665, the Pope Vitalian sent King Oswy of Northumbria a present of holy relics of early Christian saints and martyrs, including the Apostles Peter and Paul, and Ss Lawrence, John, Paul and Gregory. Our patron also figures in the list, and it is a measure of the esteem in which he was held that his name was judged fit to appear in such sacred company.

The Shrine of our Patron

In 1978 a picture of St Pancras was painted on wood by a member of the Benedictine Community at Cockfosters, and was installed as the Shrine of our Patron on his feast day, May 12, in that year. It depicts him as a sturdy Roman youth standing firm in the Faith before his basilica in Rome. He holds a model of the church as it was in the fourteenth century in his right hand, and in his left the palm of martyrdom.



The 'Cowfold Brass'



The St Pancras shrine

The Church Building

The mists of time

The early history of the building, as we have seen, is sketchy. In the North wall of the nave there is an exposed section of Norman masonry. Within this, and pre-dating it by some hundreds of years, is a scattering of Roman bricks and tiles. These provide us with a clue to the antiquity of the site. But many rebuildings and restorations have overlaid and

obscured our view of the distant past.

It is difficult now to imagine St Pancras as a rural community, but in 1650 the church was described as standing “. . . in the fields remote from any houses in the said parish.” More than once the vicar and many of his parishioners were driven to living in Kentish Town and worshipping there in the Chapel of Ease to escape the “foul’d ways and great waters” caused by the Fleet and its tributaries.

During the Civil War, London and its surroundings were in the hands of the Parliamentarians, whose regime was notoriously unfriendly towards ‘popery’ and all who practised it.

When, in the November of 1642, information came to Parliament that





The old church in decay, circa 1847

“... the King was advanced to Redding,” they sent to the city to have care, “... and further ordered the deserted Church of Pancras to be disposed of unto lodgings for fifty Troupers.” (*The Heal Collection* [MB.B5.53]).

Perhaps it was at this time that the church treasures of St Pancras parish were secretly spirited away – by whom is not known. Certain it is that when the crisis was over a unique VI century altar stone was missing, together with certain holy relics (which may or may not have been those connected with King Oswy).

Also lost were valuable articles of

Elizabethan and Jacobean silverware.

The turn of the tide

By the mid nineteenth century, a hundred years of the Industrial Revolution had scattered many a country population and turned villages into ghost towns. The Old Church of St Pancras had always been somewhat isolated, and now the City had drawn the parish's centre of gravity further and further towards itself.

In 1822 all parochial rights were transferred to the new parish church in Euston Road, half a mile away to the South. The Old Church became a Chapel of Ease and gradually fell into disuse. By 1847 it was derelict and virtually in ruins (alongside).

Ebb was followed by flow. The City had emptied the ancient parish; now it moved to engulf it. A tide of industry, and with it a swell of population, marched Northwards; and by the eighteen forties St Pancras and Somers Town were teeming with life. And there was talk of doing something about the old parish church.

Restoration of the ruined building, Victorian style, was carried out in 1847-48. Just as human folly is sometimes rewarded by curious and undeserved twists of fortune, so this monument to nineteenth century taste triggered a lucky and highly significant find

The reappearance of the stone

Until the time of which we speak (1847), a feature of the church had been the 13th century West tower (seen in the engraving far left), with



its charming cover and weather vane.

Tragically, in course of restoration, the whole of this tower was taken down: perhaps with good reason, perhaps not. However, excavating in the old foundations, the workmen stumbled across the solution to a two-centuries-old mystery: the whereabouts of the treasures hidden from Cromwell's troops.

Six feet down under the floor of the tower, they found an exquisite Elizabethan silver chalice and an Elizabethan/Jacobean flagon, both part of the missing collection of church plate. Most gratifyingly of all, they unearthed the VI century altar stone – intact, but unfortunately without any trace of the holy relics associated with it.

Subsequent studies of the stone have led to some very interesting conclusions.

It was found to be marked with five consecration crosses of curious shape. These are of a form said to be found in only one other place: on the tomb of Ethne, the mother of St Columba, who died in 597.

If this is so, it would seem to date the stone in the late 6th or early 7th century, and to confirm still further the antiquity of the church itself. It also points to a connection with the Celtic Christians via the Kingdom of Northumbria, which extended much further South than is usually realised.

The fact that the stone is of Kentish Rag has led to a good deal of conjecture; but there is no evidence as yet to support the attractive hypothesis that it served as an altar for St Augustine. The first mention of it is found in an inventory of church goods made in 1251 and now kept in the library of St Paul's Cathedral in London.

The stone itself was restored to its rightful place inlaid in the top surface of the High Altar, where it remains to this day.



Victorian 'improvements'

But we return now to the ruthless 'restoration' and enlargement of 1847-48, which included the demolition of the West tower. The nave was lengthened by 30ft to the West, the interior of the church was turned into a preaching box in the evangelical tradition with galleries all round, and a new tower in the tall and ornate 'Belgian style' was built over the South porch. Mercifully the latter did not last long, and had to be truncated to its present height.

In the eighteen-eighties, during the vicariate of the Reverend R.A. Eden, the Catholic way of worship was restored and the parish took on another new lease of life. But this only inspired, in 1888, a further wave of refurbishment in the fashion of the period.

The twentieth century

By 1925 the wooden floor was in such a bad state that it had to be replaced by solid flooring. This was not entirely the misfortune it seemed: it provided the incumbent, the Reverend J. Carter Rendell, with an opportunity to rid the building of some of the more dubious 'improvements' of the past. He took out the pews and side galleries, transferred the organ to the West gallery, and hacked away an undistinguished cladding of nineteenth century ceiling plaster to expose, for the first time in nearly a hundred years, the beautiful timbers that we enjoy today.

During the Second World War the church was badly damaged. In 1948 it was repaired and restored under the supervision of Martin Travers ARIBA. Both he and the then Vicar, the Reverend J.F.R. Westlake, were careful to see that no further harm was done.

In 1978-79 an extensive restoration of the fabric was directed by Quinlan Terry FRIBA. The Victorian extension at the West end was converted into a parish room, separated from the main body of the church by a handsome wooden and glazed screen designed by the architect in eighteenth century style. The sanctuary was cleared of

unnecessary clutter and rearranged in accordance with modern liturgical order, which is in fact a return to the simpler ways of the earlier church. New heating and lighting were also installed.

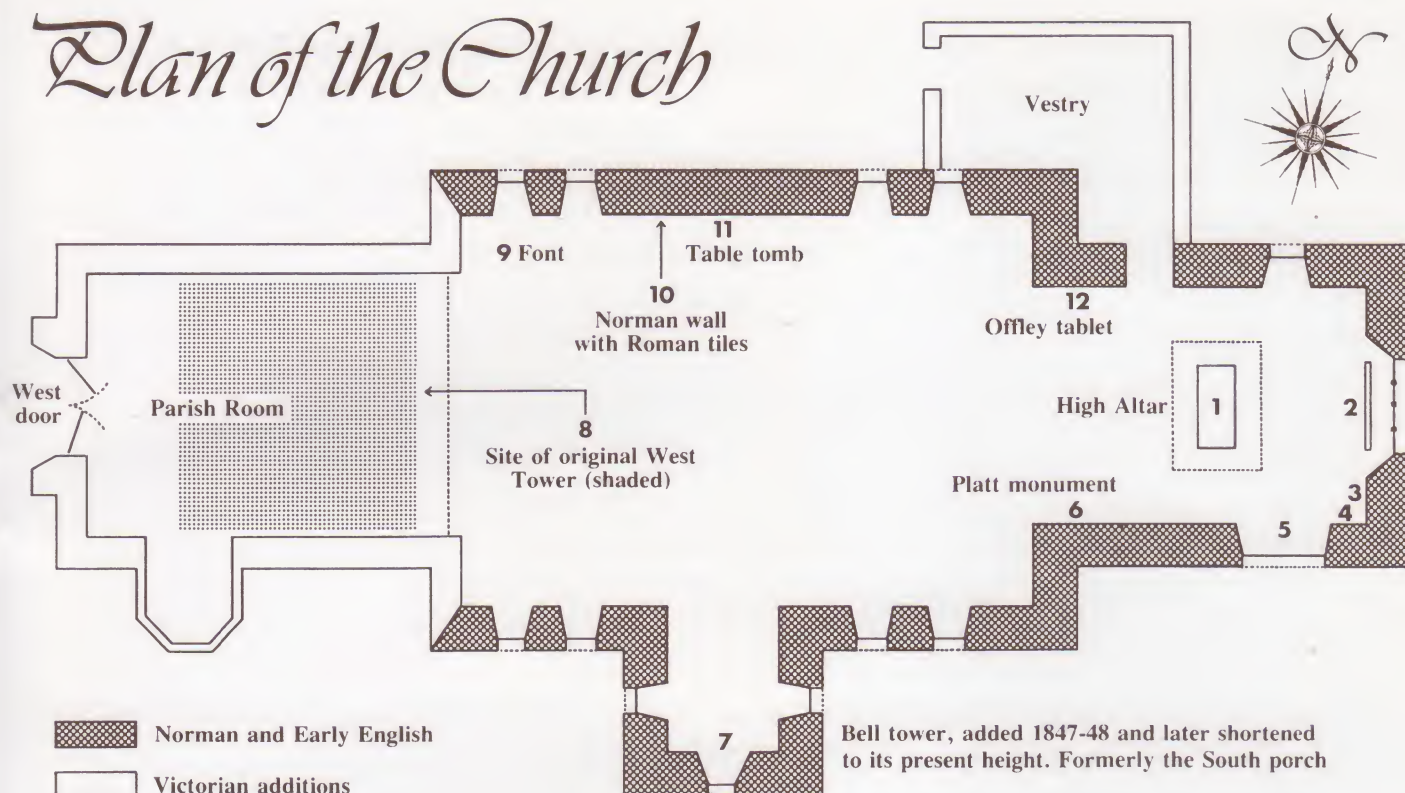
Desecration

During the night of 3rd January 1985 the church was broken into and vandalized by Satanists. The Paschal Candle was desecrated, and the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament was stolen. A Russian icon (given as far as we know by the Czar of Russia to Bishop Eden of Moray & Ross in 1866, and brought by his nephew to St Pancras in 1887) was also taken.

The surround to the tabernacle – the work of Martin Travers dating from 1925 – was damaged in the attack and, after being repaired, was returned to its earlier position in the South tower where it now houses the new Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. The opportunity was taken at the same time to restore the Blomfield reredos of 1888 to its original position below the East window.

For those who may wish to explore the history of this ancient church more fully, *St Pancras Church and Parish* by Charles E. Lee, 1955, published by The St Pancras Parochial Church Council, is recommended as an excellent and scholarly work.

Plan of the Church



1. High altar. Carved panels from the old pulpit are ascribed to a pupil of Grinling Gibbons. Set in the table is the VI century altar stone (18"x9½") retrieved in 1847.

2. Reredos by Blomfield, 1888, restored to its original position below the East window in 1985.

3. Oval tablet to the famous painter of miniatures, **Samuel Cooper**, and his wife. He died in 1672.

4. Piscina, late XIII century, much restored.

5. Sedile, XV century, with hollow chamfered jambs and four centred head; also much restored.

6. Monument to William Platt and his wife, removed from Highgate Chapel. He was a benefactor of the parish, and of St John's College, Cambridge.

7. Sacrament House (1925) by Martin Travers, from which the Tabernacle was stolen in 1985. The surround now houses a Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham.

8. XIII century tower. The shaded area indicates the position of the old West tower which was taken down in 1847. In the foundations, about six feet down, were discovered the Norman altar stone and ancient plate.

9. Font. The cover is of the XVIII century, as also is the scroll work in the tower and on the front of the gallery.

10. Norman wall. This exposed section of original Norman wall contains tiles from the Roman era. Visible also are the head of a Norman window, the splay of a window circa 1350, and the jambs of a North door.

11. Table tomb. The upper part of a tomb from the North side of the altar, once containing the brasses of two men with two and three sons respectively, and a woman with eight daughters, possibly from the family which gave its name to Grays Inn.

12. Tablet to John Offley and his wife Elizabeth and five children.



The Offley tablet

The Churchyard

The gardens

The beautiful gardens surrounding the church are the remains of two graveyards: that of St Pancras, and an extension to the churchyard of St Giles-in-the-Fields. The yard was closed to burials in 1854, having been the parish burial place for many centuries, and the gardens were opened in 1877. The Borough of St Pancras undertook the work of moving headstones and levelling the ground, and the Baroness Burdett-Coutts of Highgate, the last Lay Rector, presented the memorial obelisk.

Reburials

Twice the Midland Railway has gained permission to encroach on the churchyards. Graves were disturbed, and a well, celebrated locally as St Pancras Spa, was sealed up.

Among the affected graves were those of some distinguished French emigrés, whose remains were returned to their native land and reburied there, while the bones of

The reredos



Pasquali de Paoli, "the patriot", were repatriated to Corsica.

A great many unidentified human fragments were placed in a deep pit and covered over in seemly fashion. The supervisor of this work was a young man articled to the architect in charge. The architect was Blomfield, whose reredos still ornaments the sanctuary; and the apprentice, whose subsequent attachment to churchyards as literary venues may owe something to his experience at St Pancras, went by the name of Thomas Hardy.

Trysting place, resting place

For centuries a favourite outing for Londoners on holiday was a walk to the church, then known as St Pancras in the Fylde, "one mile from London." It was in this churchyard that the poet Shelley, lodging at 5 Chapel Terrace (now swallowed up within the railway arches), first saw and fell in love with Mary Godwin, who was visiting the grave of her famous mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneer of women's education.

For some reason the churchyard of Old St Pancras had also become the chosen resting place for a number of well-known English families from outside the parish, and for the French Roman Catholic community of Somers Town. In consequence, on the stones that remain to us today, some famous names may be seen; among them that of 'the English Bach', Johann Christian, who was buried here in 1782.

Note especially the Soane Monument to the North-East of the church. This was designed by the

architect Sir John Soane in memory of his wife, who died in 1815. He himself was buried there in 1837.

To the South-West of the church is the family grave of the Rhodes family, its most distinguished son the famous Rhodes of Rhodesia. It was Cecil Rhodes himself who ordered the restoration of the grave in 1890.

Rus in urbe

The old church now has the appearance and atmosphere of a much-loved country church in the heart of London; which is, after all, exactly what it is.

Here it stands bearing witness to the enduring Faith for which its young patron, St Pancras, died in 304. "It has lived through wars and rebellions, tumults and storms; suffered neglect and been deserted; received lavish and devoted care," and is still the house of prayer it was always meant to be.

The church possesses some very fine plate; notably an Elizabethan silver chalice (1563) which is on display in the Treasury of St Paul's Cathedral, and a magnificent flagon of Charles I period (1632) wrought out of silver with an Elizabethan hallmark.

There are a number of monuments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That of John Offley is illustrated on page 10, and of William Platt facing page 12.

Parish Priests

Mediaeval times

The first vicar of whom any record survives is *Fulcherius*, who was appointed by William de Belmeis about 1170 and instituted by Hugo de Marinis, Dean of St Paul's, with a stipend of two shillings per annum (*British Museum Charters 1045*).

The Tudor period

Down the years the list is fairly complete and some notable names occur. When *Sir William Greveson* was appointed in 1545, the living was then worth £9 a year.

John Bedow, a reformer, caused a riot by his preaching and innovations in 1549. "... This man forsaking the pulpit of this his Parish Church hath oftentimes preached out of a high Tree in the said churchyard ... and then entering the Church forsaking the Altar to have sung his high Mass in English upon a tombe of the dead facing towards the Northe." He had to flee the parish.

The incumbent appointed during the reign of Mary Stuart, a Catholic sympathiser, was for some reason favoured by her Protestant successor, Queen Elizabeth I, and was allowed to continue to say the Latin mass at

St Pancras until his death.

The Restoration, before & after

So far as is known, most of the clergy were "godly, orthodox ministers" like *William Birkett*, 1647-1655. But scandal raised its head when his successor, *Randolph Yearwood*, was arrested on three actions for debt and imprisoned at the Fleet in 1676. He was suspended for three years but was still vicar at the time of his death in 1689.

The end of an era

Two famous names bring us to the end of an era: *Thomas Fanshaw Middleton*, vicar from 1811 until 1814, whose consecration as the first Bishop of Calcutta and Primate of all India brought distinction to St Pancras and an end to his incumbency; and his eminent successor, *Dr James Moore*, whose recognition of how isolated the Old Church had become from the true centre of his thickly populated parish led to the building of the great new St Pancras Parish Church in the Euston Road.

The Old Church lost its parochial rights to the new church in 1822, became a Chapel of Ease and fell into neglect. In the eighteen-forties, as we have seen elsewhere, a gradual swing in the pendulum of population prompted a somewhat ill-conceived restoration. The church continued to be served from the new Parish Church, though still reduced in status to that of a Parochial Chapelry; but it was again holding services. The ministers during this interregnum were *Cornelius Hart* and *William Robson Arrowsmith*.

The new parish

In 1863, such was the growth of population that the Old Church was again granted independent parochial status and a new list of vicars begins.

In 1956, the parish of St Matthew, Oakley Square, Bedford New Town, was united with the old parish. Its vicar, *The Reverend A.E. Cordell*, became the first incumbent of the united benefices.

St Matthew's Church was demolished in 1976, and from 1980 the incumbents of St Mary's Somers Town have served as Priest in Charge.

Vicars of the new parish

| | |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1863-1887 | William Robson Arrowsmith |
| 1887-1912 | Robert Allan Edén |
| 1912-1926 | James Carter Rendell |
| 1927-1930 | George Victor Warry Sibley |
| 1930-1938 | Thomas Archibald Smart |
| 1938-1943 | James Joseph Moore |
| 1943-1946 | John Stafford Frederick Farrer |
| 1946-1954 | John Francis Raynor Westlake |
| 1956-1968 | Alfred Edward Cordell |
| 1969-1975 | Leslie Albert Millins |
| 1976-1980 | Robert William Coogan <i>Priest in Charge</i> |
| 1980- | Philip Dyson <i>Priest in Charge</i> |

The Platt monument



Cover illustration

"A View of the Church of St Pancras in the County of Middlesex"
Engraved for The New Universal British Traveller.

The Visitor

This is the house of God, where for 1600 years prayer and worship have been offered to Him. Please join your prayer to the myriads offered over the years and merged with those of our patron.

Lord God, grant that the prayers of the blessed martyr Pancras may ever protect us, and make us worthy of your service. We ask this through Christ, our Lord.

Pour forth, O Lord, your Holy Spirit on us, and on this place, that your Name may be glorified on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Saint Pancras, our patron, pray for us; and may the souls of the faithful, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

